DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 068 985 CS 200 235

AUTHOR Weathers, Winston; And Others
TITLE [Composition Programs for Secondary Schools.]
PUB DATE [70]
NOTE 25p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS College Curriculum; Communication Skills; *Composition Skills (Literary); Curriculum Design; Curriculum Development; Curriculum Evaluation; Descriptive Writing; *Experimental Curriculum; Expository Writing; Mass Media; *Secondary Education; Self Evaluation; *Student Centered Curriculum; *Teacher Improvement; Teacher Influence; Writing

ABSTRACT

Three articles describe three programs for the improved teaching of prose composition. Winston Weathers in "Prose Composition and Modern Awareness" (from "Oklahoma English Bulletin," 1968) argues that English teachers need to be more innovative in the teaching of composition and more willing to accept a variety of writing habits, procedures, and behaviors. They should also accept new categories of rhetoric and style, the principle of disjunctive writing, and more involvement in real life. Neil Puhl in "Specified Behavior" (from "Iowa English Yearbook," 1970) describes a composition program consisting of pretests, preassignment objectives, writing assignments based on performance objectives, duplication of some of these writings, peer group evaluation of the writings, student self evaluation, and student-teacher conferences. Frank Manchel in "Reversing the Process" (from "The Leaflet," 1969) describes some weaknesses of the La Mancha Project's first year, which was designed to study the writing process, both in composing and communicating. He then notes that the coming year will see more emphasis placed on studying the mass media and on encouraging the students to use their writing for self-examination. (Author/DI)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 068985

IOWA ENGLISH YEARBOOK

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE IOWA COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Number 15 Fall 1970

Editor: Richard J. Zbaracki, Iowa State University

Copyright, 1970, by Iowa State University

CONTENTS

Needed: One Hurricane on the Pedagogical Heath Shaw on Schools—*John DeFrain* 3
The Role of the Composition Teacher in a Pluralistic Society—*Vern Torczon* 9
Semantics, Attitudes and the Training of Teachers —*Howard F. Livingston* 16
A Lot of People Are Black—*Mildred Gladney* 21
Language and Contemporary Issues—*David K. Bruner* 26
Specific Behavior—*Neil Puhl* 32
"A Killer Who Would Shoot You for the Fun of It": A Possible Source for Hemingway's "The Killers" —*Phillips G. and Rosemary R. Davies* 36
E. M. Forster's *The Longest Journey* and its Critics —*Daniel J. Cahill* 39
Graham Greene's Spiritual Lepers—*Arnold C. Davidson* 50
An Editorial 56
I. C. T. E. Reports 59
I. C. T. E. Reports 60
Membership 63

Subscription rates: Single copy—$1.50
Five-year subscription—$7.50

The *Yearbook* publishes articles which the editors hope will prove useful to elementary, high school, and college English teachers, as well as articles of general scholarly interest, on literature, language, composition, and professional problems. MSS should not exceed 5000 words and should be accompanied by return postage. Address the Editor, Richard J. Zbaracki, *Iowa English Yearbook,* Department of English, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50010.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Iowa Council of Teachers of English
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

CS 200 235

SPECIFIED BEHAVIOR

Neil Puhl

For years teachers have attempted, generally with only limited success, to design a composition program that will allow students to achieve effective communication. In these times, teachers who design a composition program in which students are constantly demanding more freedom discover that frustration, often veering toward chaos, and insecurity, their hidden weakness, threaten the teacher's survival. These teachers have nothing to defend—good taste, etiquette and tradition having given way to only a sincerity in their attempt to understand student dissent. The composition team at Mason City High School has experienced frustration and insecurity as we—this has been a team effort—finish our second year of a separate course in composition.

We don't expect everyone to agree with what we are doing, the disapproval ranging from minor disagreement to violent opposition. Reservations? Yes, but not as many as we had two years ago. Furthermore, we were given a terrific impetus when we read Donald M. Murray's article in the May, 1969 issue of *College Composition*. The team members realized that they were attempting to do many of the things Murray was advocating.

In presenting this paper, we are aware that there is no one way to write or think and that it may be impossible to teach young persons to write well. We have concerns that we are tackling the impossible, as reinforced by F.L. Lucas who says, "To write really well is a gift inborn; those who have it teach themselves; one can only try to help and hasten the process." [1]

We have concerns about performance objectives, constantly evaluating them in light of the NCTE resolution urging caution in the use of these objectives. Cosmopolitan objectives such as appreciation cannot be discarded simply because they are difficult to measure and to evaluate. However, we ask ourselves, Are there some aspects of composition that can be adequately measured and evaluated through performance objectives?

We have concerns about how our students will fare on the Iowa Tests of Educational Development and the ACT. Our deemphasis of mechanics—utter disregard to some observers—has been applauded by many visitors to our school. However, we keep asking ourselves, Is the college-bound student suffering when he seeks admission to a university?

Another genuine concern is the psychological or emotional effect of peer-group evaluation. Students say they don't want to

---

Neil Puhl is an English supervisor in the Mason City Public Schools.

[1] F.L. Lucas, "Party of One," *Holiday*, March 1960.

be hollered at. Is there a difference between teacher and peer criticism?

A final concern is the one thing that we have tried, but have not succeeded in putting into our program, allowing the student to write the way he desires, not only finding his subject but also choosing the form he will use.

Aware of these problems, as well as others, the Mason City team has designed a composition program that involves pre-tests, preassignment objectives, writing assignments based on performance objectives, publication, peer-group evaluation, student self-evaluation, and student-teacher conferences. Basically, Walker Gibson's perception method is used, his premise being that if one looks long enough and hard enough at one's experiences, one will have something to write about, and this is accomplished through changing points of view. The method used is not as important as the goals accomplished. What is important is that the course is student-centered and trains students to accept the responsibilities of free speech.

Because the course is about one-half narrative-descriptive and one-half expository, students are given two pre-tests, one for each area. Each test is most important, for it becomes the primary objective—the desired goal that a student should reach in each of the phases of writing, a goal upon which each member of the team must agree. Through the use of performance objectives, this goal is then relayed to the student. He knows that at the end of the narrative-descriptive section, he should perform in such a manner. He also knows what is expected of him at the end of the expository unit. If a student meets in the pre-test the performances desired, he may be put on independent study or simply given credit for the class and moved into another area of writing.

The second element of the program involves the pre-assignment objective. Each student is required to spend 45 minutes a week in the writing laboratory. Here he reads various sources, listens to records and tapes, views filmstrips and uses other media in preparation for his pre-assignment objective in which he must identify properly the answers to a certain number of questions based on the readings. When he has completed this objective and it has been approved, he receives a writing assignment based on performance objectives.

Each writing assignment must have a basic objective, one upon which each member of the team, as well as the student, agrees. For example, the first writing assignment in the course is designed primarily to establish a physical point of view. This performance as well as others must be measurable.

The first writing assignment essentially is to write an objective description of a place, using spatial organization, sufficient detail, and a single physical point of view. Can these performances be measured? Describe a place using spatial organization, describe the position of objects in relationship to one another, select objective descriptive words rather than subjective words, include sufficient detail to clearly identify the place being described, illustrate an understanding of unity of point of view, use more than one paragraph in the description. The easiest of these performances to evaluate is the "more than one paragraph in length." How about sufficient details? The students during the previous year were exposed to the Christensen Rhetoric program. In a theme they can identify and measure free modifiers, additions, levels of generality, comparisons, and words indicating quality. These certainly are measures of performance.

In addition to the assignment having a primary objective and other performances that are measurable, the assignment must include alternates. Instead of a place, a student could describe a painting, photograph or drawing, or he could describe an object that is interesting and somewhat complex in structure.

The third element in the Mason City program is publication, accomplished in two ways. Students are required to type their themes. These are reproduced so that each student has a copy. The second publication is *Compo*, a collection of themes on a particular assignment from each small group and selected by members of the group. Because Mason City no longer uses lay readers to correct mechanics, these persons handle the reproduction of themes and the publication of *Compo*, as well as assist in the writing laboratory.

Once the themes are reproduced and in the hands of each student, the evaluation, peer group, begins. The peer group is a small group of 8-13 students, who have before them the performance objectives of each assignment. These members are the audience of the writer, not the teacher. He becomes only a member of the group, a resource person, when and if he is accepted. "It is the student's responsibility to earn an audience, winning respect for what he has on the page," says Murray. "We learn as our publications are evaluated by our peers, the equals we respect. Our students will teach each other and learn from the same process. Often a student will understand another student's problem and its solution better than the instructor for the student is working on the same level. It is the student's job to try to learn and to be a constructively critical audience so his classmates will learn."[2] Elbow amplifies the desirability of peer evaluation,

[2] Donald M. Murray, "Finding Your Own Voice: Teaching Composition in an Age of Dissent," *College Composition*, May 1969.

4

stating further ". . .students seldom believe what the teacher says about their writing."[3]

Self-evaluation also is important in the Mason City program. After the peers have evaluated a paper, the writer certainly can make his own evaluation, accepting and challenging points brought up. This self-evaluation continues in a one-to-one conference with the instructor, this meeting concerning a number of assignments. The teacher will listen to the student's over-all evaluation of his writing, offer suggestions, and provide an atmosphere and an incentive for writing improvement.

Pre-test, pre-assignment objectives, performance objectives, publication, peer-group evaluation, self-evaluation, teacher-student conference—these are just starts toward a composition program. What are the next steps? We are asking the students to help build the program. We are holding nothing sacred. Maybe the answer is not the Mason City program. Maybe it is based on the plan proposed by Elbow and enlarged on by Murray: Let the student choose the subject and the form he desires. For many educators it is difficult to admit that the writing teacher is no longer the authority on standards of excellence. However, he can observe and measure specified behavior of the writer and his peers. This is the heart of any composition program.

[3] Peter Elbow, "A Method for Teaching Writing," *College English*, November 1968.

5

ED 068985

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE LEAFLET

VOL. LXVIII September 1969 No. 3

Editor MARIAN GLEASON

Managing Editor STANLEY E. SPENCER

Member NCTE Information Exchange Agreement

CONTENTS

Who's To Say
Evelyn Copeland 3

Censorship Problems in Editing Literary Texts
Paul L. Millane 5

Reversing The Process
Frank Manchel 8

Education And The Fourth Reform
Edward Simpkins 16

Teacher In The Corner
Abraham Blinderman 28

Teaching English: Toward A Personal Politics Of Language
June Meyer 33

Writing Poetry—The Journey From Delight To Wisdom
Richard Lederer 44

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED
New England Assn. of Teachers of English
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

CS 200 235

REVERSING THE PROCESS

by FRANK MANCHEL

The La Mancha project was described in the September 1968 LEAFLET. This article is a progress report on La Mancha's first year.

Three important facts have emerged from the initial year of the La Mancha Project. First, the incredible inefficiency of the existing educational system. Second, the demonstrated ability of enthusiastic and competent teachers to reform that system. And third, the undeniable necessity to study mass media in the schools.

No one needs to describe to professional teachers the mess in our classrooms. We have lived too long with programs designed to comfort the lazy, to placate the spineless, and to shelter the incompetent. For too long we have excused this educational sham by worshipping the idol of precedent, by deceiving ourselves that tradition was synonymous with truth. Fortunately, this mental mediocrity is coming to an end. We are at last realizing, as Emerson pointed out decades ago, that "Education dwarfs those who conform to its standards."

If the warning buzzer has sounded for the long-awaited reforms, it is, in part, because of the dedication and skill of the La Mancha teachers. They have succeeded in spite of insufferable scheduling problems, extremely limited funds, and unbelievably complacent colleagues. If next year, many more ninth grade, college-bound students are involved in writing workshops, inter-disciplinary curricula, and mass media studies, it is because a handful of people, scorned and scarred, are still reaching for the unreachable stars.

Even so, many teachers I meet still question the value of this romantic quest to improve the teaching of writing in the schools. They skeptically ask, "Just what's so new or so good about the La Mancha Project?" I try to explain the value of our three annual state conferences—September, January and April—during which we bring high school teachers and students together to discuss curriculum matters; the value of composition workshops at the University of Vermont where *we pay* teachers to study evaluation techniques for use in *their* classrooms; the value of having both a state literary magazine and a state newspaper to publish students' writings; the value of a state newsletter for teachers to improve

Dr. Manchel is Associate Professor of English at The University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont.

their own writing skills while at the same time providing an exchange for information about writing; and the value of frequent lesson plans and study guides to stimulate discussion about composition.

"That's fine," they say, "but what's so new about the teaching of writing? We've been using Professor Don Murray's workshop methods and Dr. James Moffett's sequential approach for years." Maybe so. But when I go into these teachers' classrooms, talk with their students and question how often they write each week, meet in small groups to read each other's papers, get to choose their own topics, discuss the techniques of writing in history and science classes; select their own books, see full-length feature films, and so on *ad infinitum*, their usual responses are "Not very often . . . rarely . . . never!"

Maybe what we're doing here in the state of Vermont is not new or refreshing. Maybe the thousands of college freshmen who enter the University of Vermont have forgotten how they were taught to write, or maybe the hundreds of high school classrooms I visit each year are not valid examples of what teachers are doing in today's dehumanized educational environment. Maybe so!

No matter. Our main thrust is not to prove how revolutionary we are. Nor is it to show how meaningful changes can be achieved by moderate, able and determined individuals who choose to remain in the school system rather than escape from it. Instead, the La Mancha Project is concerned with *studying the process of writing, especially the areas of composing and communicating.* Starting with the assumption that the most important ingredient in studying student writing is the student himself, each of us is trying to discover not only how we can be more effective in helping adolescents to express themselves better, but also how we can make the work more enjoyable for everyone.

With such vague and non-behavioral objectives, it is not hard to understand why the program has a number of critical weaknesses. Our communications operation is badly constructed and articulated. Our methods of evaluation leave much to be desired. Schools find it difficult to implement some of our materials. And many English departments are unable to co-ordinate their classes with their counterparts in the physical and social sciences. It would appear to those outside our world that we are indeed madmen hopelessly fighting windmills which, as in another romantic setting the arrogant De Guiche told Cyrano, "may swing round their huge arms and cast you down into the mire."

But this is only *a* possibility. Another possibility suggested by Cyrano

is that we might go "up—among the stars." Fortunately, there is reason for optimism in our work. By not deluding the schools or ourselves that there were any ready-made solutions, we have had to re-examine what we have been doing, and we have re-learned some essential propositions about writing in general and program organization in particular. First, it has become clear to all of us that writing is essentially a process of weaving many varied strands into a finished work. It cannot be taught or learned quickly. It cannot be structured the same way with each individual, let alone with each class and school. And no one involved with the process can succeed without patience, skill, and motivation. Still further, the learner benefits more from encouragement than from negative comments. Too often, critics and colleagues forget this. Second, no one writes just for the sake of writing. Hopefully, he has something to say. His subject matter consists of ideas, facts, and opinions, shaped by language and syntax. To a large degree, that subject matter is the basis of a significant academic program and those who administer the schools need to provide a suitable setting which will improve, not impede, the learning process. Third, the writer needs both imagination and discipline to communicate effectively with his intended audience. He must, in effect, be stimulated by the illimitable possibilities that are open to him and then helped to discriminate between what he thinks he sees and what he actually sees. Fourth, the teaching of writing requires that we ourselves be willing to learn: learn not only about the writing process but also about the art of teaching. There is no place in our program for those who have already decided that there is nothing new worth discovering.

We have also realized that our work is most effective when the following organizational plan is carefully followed:

1. Teachers from the various disciplines set aside a predetermined time each month for the entire school year to plan, discuss and evaluate the program.

2. Administrators give the teachers money, time, and responsibility for attending La Mancha conferences and evaluation sessions.

3. High school departments maintain their individuality; otherwise they have nothing of value to offer us except servitude. All that we ask is that our materials and methods be tried, and that the schools inform us of the results, coupled with the reasons why.

4. One person in each school, designated as coordinator, maintains continuous communication both with the staff and the La Mancha director.

5. When the approaches prove successful, the schools implement them in their curricula next year for all students at that grade level and in that program. For example, departments should now be planning a ninth grade college-bound curriculum which includes field trips, in-class reading libraries, motion picture screenings and discussions, class publications, peer-group paper conferences, and interdisciplinary writing assignments.

In essence, our investigations so far have helped us to discover a great deal about our needs, about our relations with other human beings, and about ourselves. In each instance, we have witnessed the tremendous influence of the mass media not only in our lives but also in our culture. Consequently, the La Mancha Project, in 1969-1970, is turning its attention towards more meaningful ways of using films, books, drama, radio, television, speech, tape recorders, magazines, newspapers, and recordings in the teaching of writing.

Our main concern now is how to relate the teaching of writing to the student's thoughts and experiences, how to encourage adolescents to examine and to understand themselves through writing and working with the mass media. In effect, we are reversing the existing educational system. Instead of prescribing, we are searching; instead of limiting, we are extending; instead of talking, we are acting. To repeat, the essential problem for us is how the student adjusts himself to the world in which he lives. And following the teachings of the distinguished scholar Jean Piaget, we are not ashamed of the concept of adjustment. Its meaning denotes stopping and starting, winning and losing, comprehending and gaining knowledge. As Piaget explains it:

> Knowledge is not a copy of reality. To know an object, to know an event, is not simply to look at and make a mental copy, or image, of it. To know an object is to act on it. To know is to modify, to transform the object, and to understand the process of the transformation, and as a consequence to understand the way the object is constructed. An operation is thus the essence of knowledge; it is an interiorized action which modifies the object of knowledge.

It is our hope, therefore, that through the study of the process of communication, we will become more knowledgeable about the teaching of writing. Furthermore, we believe that a knowledge of the various communication processes will help interested individuals to discover for themselves what they think and feel about the mass media, and why they accept or reject one work of art rather than another.

So much for next year's major theme. Unless we understand *the emphasis on examining the processes of mass media,* we will fail before the school year begins in September. Let me focus now on some other relevant matters for 1969-1970: such concerns as the need for standards, the two new programs to be developed this summer, and the individual school responsibilities.

Basic to any study we conduct is the tacit agreement that we are not going to vulgarize the curriculum. It is one thing to want to teach about mass media and something else to know how. Students, for example, spend thousands of hours watching television, and we need to exercise judgment in deciding what is worthwhile discussing. Watching movies is also a valuable experience as is listening to recordings or reading newspapers, but not when they are used as escapes from the more important job of critical discussions and inquiry. Therefore, we encourage, not discourage, teachers to use discrimination in their selection of classroom materials.

Another difficulty with the teaching of mass media is that many people unwittingly accept the current pop fallacy, "anyone born later in history knows more than his predecessors." It is not our intention to replace the study of the past with the study of the popular and the present. We intend, instead, to combine the best of both worlds because they share a common heritage and thus similar human experiences and difficulties. To put it another way, our study of the mass media rests on the principle that acknowledges both the psychological needs of the young and the logical demands of the material. We do not intend to compromise either our educational principles or our responsibility to provide sound leadership.

As a result, we are preparing two mass media programs for 1969-1970: one for ninth-grade general students at Champlain Valley Union High School; one for tenth-grade college-bound students at South Burlington High School. Both courses will be based on a sound educational foundation, not on an emotional one. CVU's curriculum, for example, will emphasize not only the various kinds of mass media that influence an individual's opinions, attitudes, and judgments, but also how these media function and develop. The overall objective is critical thought. At the same time, students will be encouraged to explore film-making, television production, and newspaper publishing. The SBHS curriculum will also explore these areas, only the emphasis will be more on drama, speech, television, and motion pictures. In each school, including those in the Project that will try these materials in other curricula, the students, across

departmental boundaries, will be communicating their feelings, their ideas, and their standards. What they say, how they express it, and what it means for education form the nucleus of this year's La Mancha Project.

Let me illustrate just one way in which we are going about our work for next year: film study in the schools.

Recognizing that some of the formidable problems connected with screen education—a responsibility that also includes the study of television —are accessibility and availability of equipment and materials not only for instructors but also for individual students, the La Mancha teachers are implementing many of the major findings of the recently concluded Project in Educational Communication of Teachers College, Columbia University, under the able direction of Dr. Louis Forsdale. The TC project, for example, established that an important solution to availability was the 8mm cartridge projector, which allows individuals as well as groups to examine closely and repeatedly particular motion pictures. While the value of close reading has always been a part of any worthwhile academic enterprise, it has not always been possible with movies. Now, with the 8mm cartridge projectors, films can be carefully and continually scrutinized.

Consequently, the La Mancha Project, in cooperation with several Vermont high schools, is beginning to build a collection of important silent films in cartridges, and five Fairchild Mark IV-RV projectors have been ordered for a number of learning centers in the state. Included are films by D. W. Griffith, Charles Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., W. S. Hart, Edwin S. Porter, George Melies and Mack Sennett. Students and teachers will be able to use these motion pictures both as a source for serious study and for enjoyment.

We are using a number of sources for ordering such films, almost all of which are listed in *8mm Film Directory* (Comprehensive Service Corporation, 250 West 64th Street, New York, 10023).

Since the Fairchild cartridge holds approximately twenty-five minutes of film, it will be most useful for short movies. Full-length features will be serialized, i.e., put into a series of cartridges.

Because the Mark IV-RV projector requires no special lighting conditions, skill, or room orientation, students are able to operate the machine after several minutes' instruction. Each cartridge will be labeled and shelved in a special reserve section either in the library or a designated learning center. As we continue in this area, critical commentaries on

each film plus relevant books, articles and still-shots will be added to the resource areas.

Students will also make their own films, many of which will be subsidized by the Project. In this connection, we have purchased and made available to the cooperating schools cameras, projectors, and editing equipment. Explicitly and implicity, the La Mancha Project is trying to provide a film study program which creates opportunities for individual development in such important areas as taste and creativity.

The relation to writing should be clear. By studying films closely, the student has another source for ideas in his written work. By having to organize, develop and translate his ideas into a finished film or report, he is going through another example of how one must discipline his imagination in order to communicate effectively with an audience. By editing his rough cut of the film, the student is learning the value of re-examining and re-working his raw material. This is not to say that film production and writing are exactly similar. It is to say that they have a lot in common. It is not to say that we are throwing out writing for filming. It is to say that by relating one to the other, the student may see more clearly the differences inherent in each. In short, teaching a person to be sensitive to one art is a beginning in teaching him to be sensitive to all arts.

Finally, there is the problem of each school's responsibility for next year. Here it is mainly a belief in one's ability to accept the challenge of change. The La Mancha teacher needs to acknowledge that somehow his success in the project will depend to a large degree upon the extent of his commitment. He must acknowledge that there is a need to close the shocking gap between the world and the classroom; he must realize that in spite of the present crisis of belief that extends from the sunken earth to the majestic heavens, an effective teacher can make a difference. He must understand that what he does with his students in relation to mass media study has a relevancy not only for writing but also for helping develop a better world. And he must believe that no matter how great the challenge, it must be met.

This then is what the La Mancha Project means for 1969-1970. It will not be any easier than in past years. The world has not changed dramatically and we be but mortal men. Nevertheless, as George Bernard Shaw once said and as Robert Kennedy reminded us anew, "Some men see the world as it is and say why; others dream of things that never were and say why not?"

ED 068985

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLIC/

OKLAHOMA ENGLISH BULLETIN

A Publication of The Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

VOLUME 5 1968 NUMBER 1

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

CS 200 235

How can we "so blithely despise the glorious art of writing when it should be one of the first and major loves?" With a vibrant, clear voice, Winston Weathers faces squarely up to prose writing issues in our colleges today.

PROSE COMPOSITION AND MODERN AWARENESS

Dr. Winston Weathers

University of Tulsa
Tulsa, Oklahoma

In a recent issue of *Saturday Review*, Granville Hicks concluded his article on "The Media Crisis in the Classroom," with the observation that we must, in this modern world, think of "English in larger and more radical terms than we have been in the habit of using."[1] And Father John M. Culkin of Fordham University, in his article "A Schoolman's Guide to Marshall McLuhan," in the same publication, argues that the modern teacher, of English or any other subject, "has to be constantly engaged in audience (and by that he means student) research. It's not a question of keeping up with the latest slang or of selling out to the current mores of the kids.... But it is a question of knowing what values are strong in their world, of understanding the obstacles to communication, of sensing their style of life."[2] Both Mr. Hicks and Father Culkin are calling for a modern awareness in education, and they lead us to the interesting question "Just how much modern awareness is to be found in the profession of college English?" I would like to consider that question, with especial reference to one part of the English discipline, that of prose composition.

I would begin by noting that some evidence does exist that the English profession is not as up-to-date as perhaps it likes to think it is, that English departments are not really so much a part of the second half of the twentieth century as we would at first assume. At a recent interdisciplinary symposium held at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, the remark was made that English departments are perhaps the most parochial of all academic departments today; and even though I, as you would have done no doubt, protested that such is not the case, that all of us who teach English are highly sophisticated, well informed, and very much "with it," second thoughts nevertheless have led me, as perhaps they would lead you, to observe that we really are suspect.

Just how much modern awareness can be ascribed to a discipline that still can offer a course in modern poetry that begins

with Edwin Arlington Robinson and ends with Hart Crane? Just how much modern awareness can be ascribed to a discipline that still trudges along with the old categories of eighteenth-century literature, nineteenth-century literature, still slicing its content up into antiquated period courses? And how much modern awareness can be ascribed to a discipline that still considers the values and concerns that prevailed before World War II to be flashy and pertinent, that considers Freudianism the greatest of illuminations and still uses "verisimilitude" as the ultimate criterion in the judgment of literature? How much modern awareness can be ascribed to a discipline that still goes out looking for a Milton man or a Spenser man or a Puritan literature man to add to the faculty? How much modern awareness can be ascribed to a discipline that still prefers to have a professor publish an article in *Modern Language Notes* rather than a short story in the *Southwest Review*? And how much modern awareness can be ascribed to a discipline that reacts, too often, with inordinate hostility to the very mention of a computer?

Those questions have to do mainly with literature, of course, and I won't pursue the matter of how up-to-date we are on the literary side of the fence, but I would like to pursue the matter of our modernity in the field of composition. Most of us have taught composition at some time or other, are teaching it now, or are afraid we may have to teach it tomorrow. And I think most of us would agree that the art of composition belongs in our department and is part of our responsibility. But is there any real modern awareness in our knowledge of, our practice of, our teaching of good writing?

First, let's look at the role prose composition plays within our total discipline and the attitude we maintain toward it. I think it fair to say that, in most colleges and universities, the study of prose composition, or any writing for that matter, is considered inferior to the study of literature. Generally we are condescending about the art of writing, maintaining in various and subtle ways that teaching people how to *do* is never as nice as teaching them *to observe and respond and think*. And many of us, I suspect, would like to change the name of our department to the Department of English and American Literature and leave it at that; in fact some universities have actually moved the bulk of their writing courses over into a trumped-up communications section simply to purify their own house.

Without question literature, the spectator sport, is much nicer than writing, the player sport. And to emphasize our disdain for

the art of composition we have developed a number of excellent tricks: One, we offer as few courses in composition as possible, only rarely offering a course in advanced composition or creative writing. Two, we confine the one composition course we do offer to the freshman level. Three, in the one composition course that we do offer we frequently make sure it is subverted by actually making it a course in literature, if not the first semester, certainly the second semester. Fourth, we send into the classroom to teach composition just about any warm body we can find: housewives with a penchant to escape their domestic duties; part-time employees from the public relations office or the extension service; graduate assistants whose own command of the English language is in question. And fifth, we select textbooks for the course in the most mysterious, inexplicable, and hit-and-miss fashion.

Courses in composition indeed carry such stigma that members of the faculty struggle to achieve those graduate-school or administration paradises where they will not have to dirty their hands with Freshman English papers ever again.

Such an attitude is, of course, out of place in the modern world. In a world that is increasingly concerned about communication (and English departments frequently treat that word as though it were something they had a right to be bored with and weary of) —in a world that is increasingly concerned about communication and expression and creation, one wonders how we can so blithely despise the glorious art of writing when it should be one of our first and major loves.

Even worse, our attitude toward the teaching of composition becomes scandalous, in that, even while we treat it as an inferior activity, something that the least among us can take care of, that the best among us try to avoid, even so we use the course in composition to maintain ourselves economically. We scandalously use Freshman English to maintain the size of our departments, to support our graduate assistants, to proselyte for English majors.

Such an attitude, does it not, smacks of some ancient, fearful mentality, smacks of Victorian gentility at its worst, smacks of conservatism and vested interest that have no place in so honorable a humanistic discipline as English is. But perhaps, in the long run, it is an attitude we cannot really attack. I would not really know where to begin to change the situation. I doubt if I will ever live to see the establishment on our campuses of chairs of compositions. Chairs of literary criticism, yes. Chairs for medieval studies, yes. Chairs in the great art of writing, never.

We may profitably turn, therefore, from the place that composition has within the curriculum to the nature of the course itself—and one can say "the course" since there's usually only good old Freshman English. I agree with you, the course itself is sadly lacking in modern awareness, but I think perhaps that those in the profession who do appreciate and respect the art of composition may, with effort, add some modern awareness to what we are now doing, and with that hope in mind perhaps we can draw up something like a bill of particulars against antiquated behaviors in composition teaching and draw up for ourselves a series of suggestions for possible rejuvenation. Rejuvenation meaning, of course, not so silly a thing as chromeplating and jazzing up the course for no reason, but rather a serious effort to increase its relevance to the modern era.

I have six points to make. Point One. We live in an age of exploration and experimentation. Threatened with the stultifying horrors of mass civilization if we do not take a creative approach to existence, modern man knows he must not settle for rigid procedures in any area of life. This is a part of the modern spirit—experimentation with sound, with light, with atoms, with drugs even—to find answers and to add new dimensions to reality. Experimentation and exploration are part and parcel of modern awareness, and the question we might ask is, of course, is there any form of "experimentation and exploration" in our teaching of composition?

It seems to me that we insist, by and large, on teaching composition as though it were a thing already known, rather than as a continuing discovery of new and increasingly effective methods of expression and communication. We teach rules and regulations, hand out lists of dos and don'ts, march our students through misleading exercises—as though somehow the glorious art of writing were a settled matter, packaged and complete, suitable for the worst sort of programmed instruction, and all the student need do is "learn it" once and for all.

To be modern in composition it seems to me we should take a more creative approach. We should encourage students to try things with language they have never tried before. We should encourage realization that language and the use of it are tremendously exciting. We should encourage students to experiment with punctuation, paragraphing, grammar, syntax, and all matters—not simply to learn the way language has always been used before, but to explore new ways of language. Even grammar, that

bugaboo side of composition, could be more exciting if students were led to a discovery of a grammar of their own rather than always being straight-jacketed into a grammar already prepared.

We live in an age of interplanetary exploration, but we are afraid to experiment with a comma. How dull. I wonder if part of the everlasting problem in Freshman English isn't simply that we bore students to death, handbook them to death, workbook them to death.

Some will say, of course, that experimentation and exploration, values of the modern world, can be added to our teaching of composition only if the quality of our students is improved, that turning our present students loose without rigid controls and checks would be merely casting pearls before the swine—to mix a metaphor. But of course the answer to that is: if composition courses were succeeding as they are now taught, one might be hesitant to change them, but given the present-day results of our composition courses, I would think any change would be for the better.

Point Two. Not only is the modern world, at its best, one of discovery, exploration, and experimentation, but it is also a pluralistic world. We live, at least we strive to live, in a pluralistic society, capable of living midst a plurality of races, religions, and ideologies. As modern men, we are increasingly aware of the diversities of human experience and are struggling to accommodate "all kinds" in an orderly society and to withstand totalitarian pressures leading us to the monolithic.

I would think that into the area of composition we might carry this same pluralistic philosophy. To be modern, shouldn't we be willingly prepared to accept a variety of writing habits, procedures, and behaviors?

Strangely enough, however, we don't always allow for freedom of choice of composition. Having made an advance from old eighteenth-century prescriptivism we have, sadly, substituted a neo-prescriptivism. We still do not quite accept the idea that when one writes he should be free to make the best decision he can from as large a spectrum of locutions as possible.

For instance, Sheridan Baker has written in a text-book that all restrictive clauses should begin with "that" rather than "which."[3] Well, not in my world! In my world, restrictive clauses

begin with "that" or "which" depending. I live in a world "where it depends" and it's sometimes this and sometimes that. Likewise Messrs. Strunk and White list a number of stylistic rules, applicable apparently to all writers at all times: 1) Place yourself in the background. 2) Use the active voice. 3) Avoid the use of qualifiers. 4) Do not overstate. 5) Do not overwrite. And what they are really doing is describing *their* style, *their* ways of writing, *their* practices, and refusing to take a liberal or pluralistic view of any other way of doing it.

In fact, I'm sorry to say, many English teachers remain sadly totalitarian in spite of modern pluralism, and assume there has to be *some one way* to write. They are not willing to accept a multitude of ways. It seems to me that we must—if we are to be modern—stretch our minds a little and become more flexible and tolerant: There is, after all, Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry. Both.

Point Three. The modern world, at its best, is realistic. We all know that one of the sins of the modern generation is phoniness. Holden Caufield and the Glass family taught us that a decade ago. We must be realistic—and relevant. And already the call has gone up for education in general to remove "the Procrustean forms of schedules, classrooms, memorizing, testing, *etc*, which are frequently relics from an obsolete approach to learning."

Now we may not be ready to dispense with all forms and structures of learning, but we might be willing to remodel a few, and I think we might be led to add this sense of realism and relevance in our teaching of composition by taking a look at what we ask our students to write.

I can think of nothing more unrealistic and more removed from actuality, for instance, than the conventional Freshman theme or composition—that 500-word wonder that no one ever encounters anywhere else on earth. To be modern, we must start writing and teaching the prevalent forms of composition—such things as popular articles, critical reviews, personal essays of the sort that are actually published in magazines and journals, academic papers that are read at professional meetings, even the formal essay that is presented on special ceremonial occasions. But never the 500-word theme, with a restricted number of paragraphs.

Most students graduate from high school knowing how to write a book report and graduate from college knowing how to

write a 500-word theme. And they go forth to live in a society where no one in his right mind ever writes a book report or a 500-word theme again.

This sense of restricted, unrealistic form relates even to our rejection of all kinds of writing except exposition. If we were really modern I think we would want to teach composition in its broadest sense—teach the writing of poetry, drama, fiction—if not all in one class, in a set of classes. If we are teaching composition, why not teach the full range of it, why settle for a narrow slice of it? But, as I suggested earlier, we all know how suspect creative writing is in our curricula, and how courses in creative writing have really come into their own only in the last ten years and on only a few of our major campuses. No, we cut out all creative forms, then we cut out all expository forms except the 500-word theme, then sit back, happy that everything is up-to-date in Kansas City."

Point Four. Not only is the modern world realistic as far as its forms are concerned, but realistic about categories, too. With the modern questioning of Aristotelian classifications, categories, and definitions, we have been asked in some quarters to avoid categorizing altogether. But even if we can't quite do that, we may at least be so modernized as to revitalize our categories and make necessary readjustments.

To be modern in composition, I think we must establish some new categories of rhetoric and style, more realistic and more honest than the current ones. The old categories, for instance, of formal, informal, and colloquial are increasingly meaningless in a society that just doesn't operate in terms of formality any longer. America has been so standardized that both formality and the colloquial are extremely rare, and to continue to teach composition in those terms is antiquated.

Why not, in an attempt to be modern, give the student categories of language usage that would prepare him to write a certain way when (1) he wishes to speak with extreme confidence and authority; another way when (2) he wishes to speak simply as the average, reasonable man; another way when (3) he wishes to indicate his emotional involvement with his subject and audience; and yet another way when (4) he wishes to indicate his realization of the meaningless and absurd. It seems to me that such categories—certitude, judiciousness, involvement, and absurdity—would speak more to the modern condition than do

formal, informal, and colloquial, or high, middle, and low styles. But whatever the new categories may be they should be developed.

Point Five. The modern world acknowledges the reality and validity of multiple experiences, that is, the having of more than one experience at the same time. Just as the modern world is pluralistic it also is multiplistic, and we are discovering, certainly in areas of design, painting, interior decoration, furniture and like, the principle of disjunction. Disjunction is, of course, the name we give to this having of diverse but simultaneous experiences, and disjunction has been discovered in the modern world primarily as the result of new and complex media or art and communication.

In the area of composition, the acceptance of the disjunctive principle would be a gesture toward modernity. Professor William Sylvester, at the State University of New York at Buffalo, had a brilliant article on "The Existence of a Disjunctive Principle in Poetry," in a recent issue of *College English*,[5] and it is that same principle that we need to acknowledge in prose. Disjunction in language occurs when we put down words that communicate on the one hand and on the other provide structural, phonetic, and other such experiences not necessarily related to the communication experience. It is the act of separating form and content and achieving separate messages.

I know, however, that there are English teachers who still get all upset about the idea of ornamentation in writing and fall back on the old idea of organicism and start talking, the way people used to talk, about the organic relationship of content and form. But the organic fallacy—so popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—simply cannot be allowed to dominate our thinking any longer; we must accept the idea that patterns and experiences can occur in prose writing that are simply there for the disjunctive effect of delight, while the content goes on its separate way. This is simply a truth about language that close examination reveals and any writer, worth his salt, certainly knows that he writes with both his left hand and his right hand, and the performance is not to be all tied up in some false notion of organic unity.

Point Six. And finally, if we are modern men and women, we accept the principle I feel of involvement and action in the arena of real life. The idea of involvement has certainly been popularized in our day, and if anything is anathema to the mod-

ern generation it is the sitting back in the easy chair while life goes on about us. Nothing is worse than the refusal to participate and perform on the stage of contemporary existence. We live in a world where the words *do* and *act* and *perform* are key terms.

Surely then to be modern in the area of composition we will seek an increased involvement on the part of teachers in the act of writing itself. It certainly seems strange that a teacher would be in the classroom to teach something he is not willing or able to do himself, and the old cliche that those who can do and those who can't teach is old fashioned and out-dated. People who can't read poems don't teach other people how to read poems. People who can't or don't write shouldn't be teaching other people how to write. We live in an age of great craftsmanship—young men and women are increasingly skillful in doing things, in making things, in organizing things. How out of step with the times if we go into the classroom and plead that we are somehow exempt from the test of performance itself.

This is the great trouble, as I implied earlier, in sending the graduate assistant into the classroom. I admit the graduate assistant is frequently a most likable and splendid person, and frequently quite brilliant. He is brilliant in his analysis of a poem, or he is brilliantly informed about the sixteenth century, or he's read all about Henry James, or he's a crackerjack collector of James Joyce bibliography, but unless he can and does put words on paper and blackboard for all to see, and with skill, what is he doing teaching composition?

A distinguished professor at the University of Oklahoma recently defended the graduate assistants by mentioning the great enthusiasm that young teachers frequently bring to the classroom. I agree that graduate assistants frequently do bring enthusiasm. I knew a young intern once who went into surgery with great enthusiasm. The patient died. With vigor.

And alas, even some of those of us who are fully doctored somehow manage to avoid the act of composition. One of my distinguished colleagues at the University of Tulsa recently pointed out to me that many a research professor lingers on in the library, hunting down one last bit of evidence or checking out one last reference, simply in order to avoid the act of writing, to avoid putting words on paper, out of some natural antipathy to composition. Yet we always assume this very man will have no trouble teaching composition, since anybody can do that.

No, I think it's old fashioned and unrealistic to think that just anybody can do it. I think to teach composition one must write—and write willingly and frequently—and be modern and be involved. We are not with it if we avoid the action. The action in the composition classroom is not in the talking about writing or learning how to read what someone else has written; it is in the writing itself on the part of both professor and student.

These then are the six particulars and six areas of composition in which modernization is needed and can occur. If indeed we can really add experimentation, pluralism, realism, multiplicity, and involvement to our courses in composition, I think we will have made them more rewarding courses for the decades in which we live. More modern. More valuable to the young men and women who come to us for instruction. As Father Culkin says, "All the data isn't in on what it means to be a balanced human being"[2] in the modern world, but enough of the data is in, it seems, to suggest the necessary changes in our courses.

The call then is for modern awareness—in prose composition and in the profession in general. There simply are new frontiers, and we simply must be up-to-date. Not to survive; we will survive. But to be morally and ethically responsible to our students and ourselves, we must do more than survive, chanting along the old cliches, trudging year after year through old courses falling deeper and deeper into the shadows. For instance, we must overcome our silly provincial attitudes toward computers—and use them in rewarding ways. For instance, we must realize that Hemingway and Faulkner are really dead. For instance, we must realize that it will be all too easy for us who were the gay blades of the thirties, forties, and fifties to become the fuddy duddies of the sixties and seventies.

I would begin our rejuvenation and modernization with a correction of our attitudes toward and teaching of prose composition. I believe such a revitalization would echo throughout all other areas of our concern. We might even eventually shake up the Shakespeare course. And wouldn't it be a great pleasure to wake up some morning and realize that our English departments had become the centers of great excitement and innovation; had become truly useful in the electronic age, not merely deadweights; and that we were no longer in danger of being buried alive beneath our own dullness and recalcitrance.

REFERENCES

1. Hicks, Granville. "The Media Crisis in the Classroom." *Saturday Review*, 50:28 (April 15, 1967).

2. Culkin, John M. "A Schoolman's Guide to Marshall McLuhan." *Saturday Review*, 50:51-3, 70-2 (March 18, 1967).

3. Baker, Sheridan. *The Practical Stylist*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1962, p. 62.

4. Strunk, William, Jr. *The Elements of Style*. (Ed. by E. B. White) New York: MacMillan, 1963.

5. Sylvester, William. "The Existence of A Disjunctive Principle in Poetry, A Preliminary Essay." *College English*, 28:265-272 (January, 1967).

NEXT ISSUE OF THE O. E. B.

Several members of the OCTE have indicated their desire to contribute to the OEB, but have expressed the problem of lack of time to develop longer articles.

The next OEB will feature a section under the title "BETTER IN A LETTER." This section will provide for you an opportunity to get in writing that idea you want to share, that cause you want to champion, or that gripe you want to get off your chest.

The only requirement: It must be English related. Before you forget, write now to:

Gordon L. Hanna
Casady School
Box 20507
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73120